

Le Roi des Batailles:

THE DECISIVE ROLE OF THE ARTILLERY AT DIEN BIEN PHU

by First Lieutenant John A. Hamilton, Jr., and Mr. Larry M. Kaplan

You must take care to choose an elevated position, in order to fall upon the enemy with greater advantage. But the most important point is not to gather your army on a plain situated at the foot of a mountain which the enemy might be able to occupy unimpeded; for with his artillery he would crush you from the neighboring heights; in vain would you try to prevent his batteries from hitting you ceaselessly and without impediment. Embarrassed by your own troops, you would find it impossible to harm him.

Machiavelli

The Art of War, Book IV



Some historians claim that Dien Bien Phu was the decisive battle of the first Indo-Chinese War (1946-1954) because the Viet Minh defeat of the French just before the 1954 Geneva Peace Talks had wide-ranging military and political effects which have been the subject of more scrutiny than the battle itself. Of the many military lessons, the decisive effect of the Viet Minh's large scale employment of field artillery deserves a closer examination.

When the French returned to regain their former Indo-Chinese possessions at the end of World War II, they became involved in a long, arduous military campaign against Ho Chi Minh's guerrillas. By 1953, Vo Nguyen Giap, history professor turned general, was enjoying considerable success against the French in northern Vietnam. The Viet Minh were growing in strength, forming division-sized units and gaining

increasing control of the territory—Giap's purely guerrilla command grew to include six infantry divisions, one heavy division of artillery, and some engineer units.

The Commander in Chief of French Indo-Chinese forces, General Henri-Eugene Navarre, became alarmed when Viet Minh operations threatened existing French outposts in northern Vietnam, many of which could only be supplied by air. As the French situation deteriorated, Navarre believed that the way to salvage French hegemony and stop the spread of Viet Minh activity was to take the offensive against Giap's forces.

Dien Bien Phu, located near the Laotian border approximately 220 miles west by northwest of Hanoi, consists of a broad expanse of flatland ringed by crests five and six miles from the center of the valley. Viet Minh units based at Dien Bien Phu were conducting

operations into Laos (a French Union member) and held two of the many pre-World War II French airfields. Navarre's plan was to launch an airborne assault on Dien Bien Phu to reopen the airfields, fortify the valley, and use it both as a base for offensive operations and as a block against further Viet Minh activity into Laos. Unfortunately, Navarre's plan grossly underestimated the artillery capabilities of the Viet Minh and foredoomed the French plan before the first paratrooper hit the ground.

Prior to the battle of Dien Bien Phu, the Viet Minh had sporadically used old Japanese 75-mm and old Chinese 57-mm and 75-mm weapons. But Giap's forces received American 75-mm pack howitzers and American 105-mm howitzers from the Red Chinese, who had captured them during the Chinese Civil War and the Korean War. In addition, the Red Chinese



(The five photos of French field artillery positions are courtesy of E.C.P. Armées.)



trained numerous Viet Minh units in China and sent advisors and instructors to Giap's army to teach his fledgling artillerymen the basics of fire direction and observed fire techniques.

The Viet Minh's acquisition of modern howitzers and their training did not go unnoticed by French intelligence. Yet, the overwhelming French faith in their abilities, specifically their airpower, led the French to dismiss this threat—a blunder later paid for by the blood of French Union soldiers.

Navarre's attack on Dien Bien Phu began on 20 November 1953, but the bulk of the Viet Minh 312th Division was not present. Unknown to French intelligence, artillery and mortars from the Viet Minh 351st Heavy Division were already in Dien Bien Phu, with more units on the way. Ironically, the Viet Minh considered the valley as an excellent artillery firing range.

The French paratroopers jumped into the Dien Bien Phu valley and were able to consolidate

Table 1. Order of battle of French artillery units posted to Dien Bien Phu (1953-54)

3d Group, 10th Colonial Artillery (III/10 RAC), three batteries of 105-mm howitzers.
2d Group, 4th Colonial Artillery (II/4 RAC), three batteries of 105-mm howitzers.
11th Battery, 4th Group, 4th Colonial Artillery (11/IV/4 RAC), four 155-mm howitzers.
I Battery, North Vietnam AAA Group (FTA-NVN), two sections of quad .50-caliber machineguns.
1st Foreign Legion Heavy Airborne Mortar Company (1 CEMPLP).
1st Foreign Legion Composite Mortar Company (1 CMMLE).
2d Foreign Legion Composite Mortar Company (2 CMMLE)

their base. With the first wave jumped two batteries of 75-mm recoilless rifles of the 35th Airborne Light Artillery Regiment (they did not recover their pieces until after the initial fire fights) and the 120-mm mortars of the 1st Foreign Legion Heavy Airborne Mortar Company. Ultimately, French artillery assets would reach a total of four American 155-mm howitzers (towed), 24 American 105-mm howitzers (towed), 32 120-mm heavy mortars, and some

81-mm mortars organic to the various infantry units. (Table 1 shows the order of battle of the French artillery units.)

Opposing the French artillery were the 154th and 345th Artillery Battalions of the Viet Minh infantry divisions, as well as various other assigned artillery units fielding 75-mm recoilless rifles, 75-mm pack howitzers, and 82-mm and 120-mm mortars. The bulk of the Viet Minh artillery assets were from the 351st Heavy

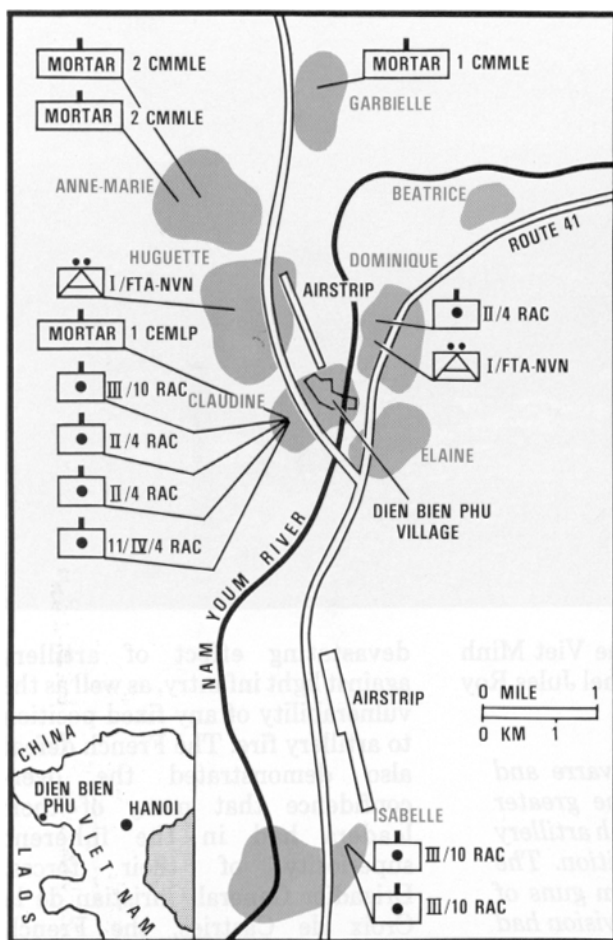
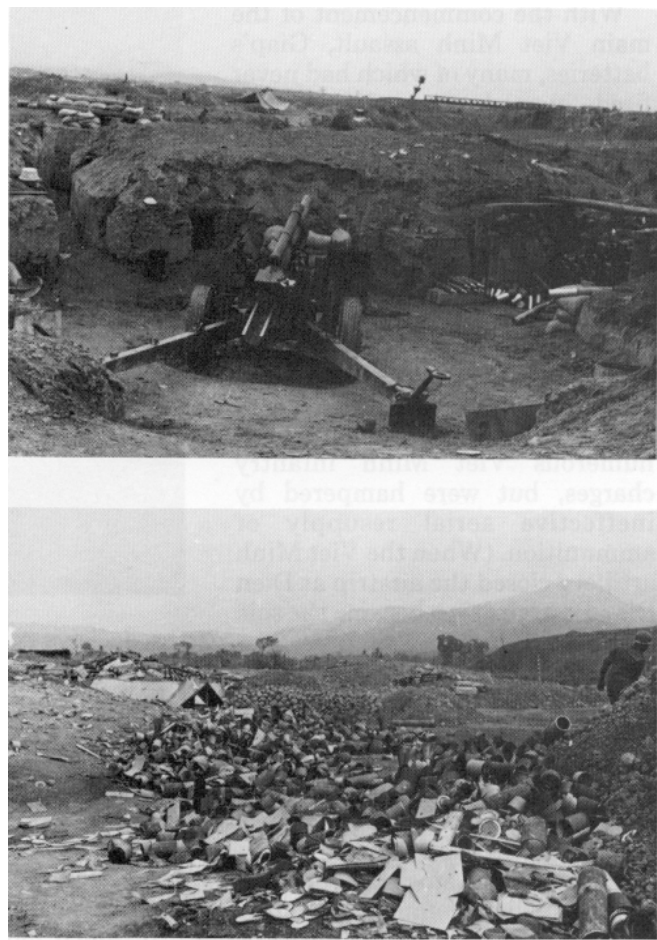


Figure 1. French defense points at Dien Bien Phu (1954).



Division, consisting of the 237th Heavy Weapons Regiment (40 82-mm mortars), the 45th Artillery Regiment (24 105-mm howitzers), the 675th Artillery Regiment (15 75-mm pack howitzers and 20 120-mm mortars), the 367th Antiaircraft Regiment (20 37-mm antiaircraft and 50 .50 - caliber antiaircraft guns), and a rocket unit armed with 16 Katyusha rocket launchers. Indo-China authority Bernard Fall has estimated that the Viet Minh artillery outnumbered the French artillery by four to one.

Giap's regular forces soon moved into the area, surrounding and sealing off the French garrison, leaving it logistically dependent on its overtaxed Air Force. French intelligence reported the movement of large numbers of Viet Minh artillery and again confirmed the existence of American 105-mm howitzers in the Viet Minh inventory. Surprisingly, neither Navarre, who was headquartered in Saigon, nor his northern commander Major General Rene Cogy, who was

headquartered in Hanoi, appeared very concerned about these developments. Cogy and Colonel Charles Piroth, the artillery commander and second senior officer at Dien Bien Phu, were both artillerymen; but neither expected any difficulties from the Viet Minh artillery, believing that the Viet Minh could not transport more than 25,000 rounds of ammunition into Dien Bien Phu with the French Air Force interdicting their ammunition trains. In fact, the Viet Minh, through extreme resourcefulness and the back-breaking labor of thousands of coolies, transported howitzers and more than 300,000 rounds of artillery ammunition into the hills surrounding Dien Bien Phu. The success of the incredible Viet Minh supply effort even surprised Giap, whose own logisticians were far from confident they could supply the force that was gathering around the French base *aero-terreste* (air head).

The French gunners, including General

Cogy and Colonel Piroth, also did not believe that the Viet Minh artillery could hit their installation in the valley from positions behind the crests of the surrounding mountains. The French assumed that the crests were sufficiently remote from the center of the valley to prevent a trajectory which would successfully target the valley. Piroth believed he could destroy any gun set up on the front of a crest with his 155-mm battery and stated more than once that he could destroy any Viet Minh gun that fired more than three rounds.

In early March 1954, Giap's troops were ready to launch their main assault. After months of preparation the Viet Minh had moved into the area more guns, more supplies, and more ammunition than the French Air Force could fly into the garrison. Even with borrowed US C-119 transport aircraft, the French Air Force experienced increasing difficulty in both supplying the garrison and locating the Viet Minh positions.

With the commencement of the main Viet Minh assault, Giap's batteries, many of which had never fired, opened up on the French position—particularly on their guns and airfield. French observation posts were methodically captured, and Red Chinese anti-aircraft guns and crews greatly limited the French use of spotter planes; consequently, Piroth's gunners were unable to acquire and attack many of the Communist gun batteries. They did acquit themselves well in breaking up numerous Viet Minh infantry charges, but were hampered by ineffective aerial resupply of ammunition. (When the Viet Minh artillery closed the airstrip at Dien Bien Phu, airdrops became the sole source of French supply. The French Air Force was unable to airdrop the required tonnages and lost an estimated 20 percent of what it did drop to the Viet Minh.)

The fierce counterbattery duels exacted a heavy toll in French lives and ammunition stocks. Piroth, the French artillery commander, failed to assess the artillery capabilities of the Communists and thus neither dug in his guns nor obtained additional artillery pieces when he had the opportunity. The French gunners took severe casualties early in the battle, and the commander was soon without qualified fire direction center teams and gun crews. Eventually, French artillerymen who were not jump-qualified were forced to parachute into the area. (In light of his own blunders and the devastating cost the French garrison was paying, Colonel Piroth took his own life with a hand grenade during the battle.)

The devastatingly effective Viet Minh artillery destroyed the French strongpoints one by one, until by 7 May all of the French outlying strongpoints (figure 1) had been overrun and a final Viet Minh surge had overwhelmed starving defenders who were down to their last round of ammunition. Seventy-five percent of all French casualties had been inflicted by the Viet Minh batteries which the French artillerymen had been unable to silence. In summing up




the decisive role of the Viet Minh artillery, French Colonel Jules Roy later wrote:

Unknown to Navarre and Cogne, by 1954 the greater part of the Viet Minh artillery was already in position. The regiment of 105-mm guns of the 351st Heavy Division had installed most of its 24 guns under yards of rock without being observed.

Giap even treated himself to the luxury of establishing dummy emplacements to draw French fire. If Cogne had known this, he would have given orders for the guns of the entrenched camp, which were installed out in the open, to be buried, and Piroth would no longer have said he had too many guns; he would have asked for three times as many.

The fall of Dien Bien Phu marked the virtual end of French control over Indo-China. The battle reaffirmed the decisive and

devastating effect of artillery against light infantry, as well as the vulnerability of any fixed position to artillery fire. The French defeat also demonstrated the over-confidence that many of their leaders had in the inherent superiority of their forces. Brigadier General Christian de la Croix de Castries, the French commander at Dien Bien Phu, later noted, "Our defense had been founded on the fact that planes would be able to detect and destroy the (Viet Minh) guns." The French placed too much faith in their Air Force, which was unable to make up for a deficient artillery capability.

In the final analysis, General Giap understood the importance of artillery and forced his logisticians to move his guns and the vast stores of necessary ammunition through the jungle to the valley of Dien Bien Phu. Had the French made a similar attempt to effectively deploy and employ their artillery assets, the decisive battle of the First Indo-Chinese War might have had a different outcome. 

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